



A mannequin outside the 3rd Street Promenade Gap
Wally Skalij/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

Inside the Santa Monica Police Department's Botched Response to May's Looting Spree

As business owners and the public continue to demand answers, the political casualties are piling up

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Santa Monica has more reason than most cities to be nervous about the next big social upheaval. Yes, like the rest of us, it survived the election—even if the plywood boards that went up over shop windows in late October have yet to be taken down. But Santa Monicans also know that the last serious test of public order that they faced, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, was an unmitigated disaster, and there's no telling what might happen the next time racial injustice or political divisions bring protesters back into the streets.

Santa Monica's elected leaders, public agency heads, and 90,000 residents remain haunted by the memory of May 31, when organized gangs of looters took advantage of a largely peaceful Black Lives Matter protest near the oceanfront to smash their way into hundreds of businesses, rip off their merchandise, start fires, and instill unfamiliar feelings of fear and dread in what, until that moment, had been a happy-go-lucky upscale beach community enjoying every advantage.

Santa Monica residents, not unreasonably, expected their police department—one of the highest paid in the country—to handle both the protest and the criminality that exploded along the commercial corridors around it. But, as the day unfolded, citizens saw looters moving around with impunity while the police stayed largely confined to a few blocks downtown.



The scene in Santa Monica on May 31, JIMMY JELLINEK

It was obvious at the time that law enforcement was absent from large swaths of the city's roughly 8.5 square miles, even when business owners and residents were crying out for protection. Police dispatchers told people over and over again: "You're on your own." Anger at that glaring absence, and at the city's failure to produce a coherent post mortem in the months since, was a major factor in the collapse of the city's most powerful political machine on Election Day and the triumph of reformist newcomers over incumbents in three out of four contested city council seats.

The reality, though, may have been even worse than the public perception. An investigation by *Los Angeles* magazine, based on public records requests that have yielded hundreds of previously unseen documents, as well as interviews with past and present public officials, significantly undermines the argument made by city officials in the immediate aftermath of May 31 that they were overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Rather, the evidence shows that incompetence, inexperience, and a failure to respond to clear warning signs played a major role in what outside experts believe was a largely preventable catastrophe.

The police did not have nearly enough officers assigned to work that day, *Los Angeles* has found, and could not call up reinforcements fast enough when trouble erupted. They did not see—or did not believe—the multiple social media posts openly announcing looting runs by street gangs, even though city employees and elected officials flagged them as they appeared. The initial assumption, in fact, was that the looters were opportunistic shoplifters, when it soon became clear that they were highly organized and working in teams.

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An inexperienced top brass did not arrange for street closures, or have community service vehicles ready to block freeway exits, or use city buses to close off major thoroughfares— all tactics Santa Monica police have had ready to deploy in the past. For much of the day they knew less about what was going on than the public, because the drone they typically use to provide aerial intelligence was not working and the main command post they set up in a bus depot, unlike their headquarters just a couple of blocks away, had spotty internet service and no televisions on which to follow the wall-to-wall media coverage.

And so the looters were free to breach iron gates and smash windows, pick more than 150 businesses clean, damage more than 200 others, and start close to a dozen fires.

Cars, many of them later found to have been stolen from car lots, according to city officials, pulled on and off the freeway with impunity until mid-afternoon, their occupants jumping out with suitcases and tote bags which they stuffed with designer sneakers and sports equipment. Multiple eyewitnesses saw them coordinating by cell phone; often, the cars would circle the block, pointing in the direction of the freeway by the time the bags were filled.

After the city called a curfew and the freeway was closed, more cars tore down all four lanes of Santa Monica's deserted main east-west thoroughfares, swerving wildly with crowbars dangling from the open windows like something out of a dystopian drag-racing movie.

Some business owners stood guard outside their stores with semi-automatic weapons. Others frantically boarded up windows, to little effect. "We were so scared," says Lana Negrete, owner of a family-run music store more than a mile from downtown that was stripped of tens of thousands of dollars of instruments. "When we called the police, they told us, you're not getting any help. If someone ends up getting shot, you're going to have to drive yourselves to the hospital."

The mayhem should have been foreseeable, because other parts of the region had experienced similar attacks on shops and businesses over the previous two nights, alongside the large public gatherings to demand justice for George Floyd. Some journalists who had been tracking social media came to Santa Monica in anticipation of just such a turn of events. **But the chief was out of town most of the week to attend her daughter's high school graduation in northern California and did not return until the morning of May 31.** Of her four captains, only one had been in the job for more than a few months.

Between them, they decided to focus on the area immediately surrounding the protest. Officers sealed off the pier, the city's most valuable and most recognizable landmark, along with the Promenade, the high-traffic pedestrian row of shops and restaurants that runs along several blocks of 3rd Street. That left the rest of the city

startlingly unprotected—starting with 4th Street, one block east of the Promenade, which got hit hardest.

Cynthia Renaud, the chief at the time, later reported that in anticipation of possible trouble she had quintupled the number of officers on duty. But she did not spell out, until asked months later, that on Sundays the SMPD typically deploys eight to ten officers.

According to two separate sources and Renaud’s own math, the city had around 45 officers on hand (out of more than 220) to deal with a protest that was 8,000 people strong. Renaud later claimed she had “approximately 70” officers on duty by 11 a.m., and certainly more than 45, but would not be drawn on exact numbers.

Once the chief started receiving reports of agitators in the protest crowd—including some who were reportedly hit officers with rocks and bottles, and set a squad car on fire—she ordered half the off-duty police force to come to work right away and the other half to relieve them six hours later.

Many of those officers, however, live more than an hour’s drive away—in places like Palmdale and Thousand Oaks—and by the time they arrived much of the damage was done. Police forces from neighboring jurisdictions and from cities as far away as Santa Maria, 160 miles to the north, responded to requests for backup, but they too took time to arrive. The acting city manager—the top public executive under the city charter—called for the National Guard shortly after 2 p.m., but they were redirected by the L.A. Sheriff’s Department for reasons that are far from clear and did not show up for another six hours.

Even with extra manpower, the police were far tougher on the protest crowd than they were on the looters. They ended up arresting more than 400 people, only eight of whom were later charged with felony offenses. By contrast, the vast majority of looters escaped; in the months since, police working from video surveillance footage and other

evidence have tracked down and arrested just 22 others accused of looting, arson, or firearms violations.

“You had a bunch of untrained people at the top handling a situation they’ve never handled before,” John Miehle, a former Santa Monica police captain and tactical specialist who was shocked enough by what he saw to take the unusual step of criticizing his former colleagues on the record. “This is not about the rank and file. Supposedly, someone drew up a tactical plan... but the whole thing turned to crap. You meet force with planning, intelligence and overwhelming force, not with 45 cops.”



JIMMY JELLINEK

As the looting continued unabated, officers in tactical gear devoted the bulk of their energies to arresting protesters, many of them peaceful. They used tear gas and rubber bullets to assert their authority, to the consternation and fury of many in the crowd. While they insisted they offered a route for peaceful dispersal, many said they felt hemmed in and unable to escape.

Hundreds of people ended up being dumped in a parking lot outside the city limits in the dead of night, in many cases after they’d had their wallets and cell phones confiscated. Some protesters complained they were told they’d have to wait a week to get their property back.

Santa Monica is far from the only American city that endured property damage or violence in the wake of the Floyd's killing. But unlike other cities where the clashes were triggered or exacerbated primarily by police heavy-handedness, Santa Monica is notable for a different set of problems that are arguably just as troubling: a clamorous failure by law enforcement to do its job in the face of unfamiliar threats and sky-high social tensions, and a parallel failure by much of the city's civilian leadership to recognize that failure.

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Before and immediately after the events of May 31, city officials focused much of their attention not on the question of police preparedness but on making sure they had offered sufficient public expressions of support for Black Lives Matter. “We never want to lose sight of the fact that our commitment first and foremost is to undoing systemic racism,” the city’s mayor, Kevin McKeown said in an interview over the summer. He pointedly refused to criticize the police’s performance, insisting that to do so would be like “second-guessing an earthquake”.

Such reluctance to hold the police to account has persisted for months. The SMPD promised to produce an internal assessment of what went wrong by August, only to renege on that promise at the last minute. It was not until September that a handful of council members demanded funding for an independent investigation, which is now underway but is not expected to report back until next April at the earliest. And it wasn’t until October that the acting city manager did what many felt she should have done right away and induce Chief Renaud to announce she was retiring.

Even now, with former SMPD chief Jacqueline Seabrooks back in charge on an interim basis with a mandate to right the ship, the reluctance to acknowledge anything seriously wrong still runs deep.

“I have the utmost confidence in the [department leadership’s] capabilities currently, and certainly would have several months ago if I had been here,” Seabrooks said in an interview last week. When pressed on the details of what occurred on May 31, Seabrooks said she would wait to hear back from the independent investigators before drawing any conclusions.



Greg Morena, then one of Santa Monica’s seven city council members, spent the morning of May 31 planning to join the Black Lives Matter protest along with one of his colleagues. But when he saw television footage of looters pouring out of cars and helping themselves to merchandise from REI on 4th Street, he hopped on his bicycle and went downtown right away.

Morena headed first to the pier, where his family owns a seafood restaurant. Even before he arrived it became obvious that the “loot runs” advertised in advance on social media were real. “It wasn’t just a couple of kids knocking windows out ... It was coordinated,” he said. “I saw five people with clothing in bags and boxes jump into cars that were waiting for them and get back on the freeway. I’m very aware of what a setup looks like, and this was a setup, man. It was so plain to see.”

Two blocks from REI, at 4th and Colorado, Morena ran into two of the city’s four police captains, Darrick Jacob and Candice Cobarrubias. They had set up a command post and had up to half a dozen other uniformed officers around them. Morena’s immediate impression was that the captains were in complete control of the situation. But, in retrospect, a different picture emerged.

Jacob, who had deputized for Chief Renaud during her out-of-town trip, made it clear to Morena that his focus was on unrest within the Black Lives

Matter protest. He said almost nothing about the looters who, within eyeshot, were attacking storefronts with hammers and pickaxes, running off with bags full of designer sneakers and starting fires. Morena himself described the scene as “mayhem.”

Terry O’Day, then Santa Monica’s mayor pro tem, had a similar impression when he passed by the same intersection shortly after. He said the tenor of what he was told was: “Yes, we know, we really can’t deal with that right now.”

According to three separate sources familiar with police thinking on the day, Jacob and Cobarrubias believed the looters were just opportunistic shoplifters. Stealing up to \$950 in merchandise is a misdemeanor under California law, and—the sources said—the captains decided they didn’t have time to chase misdemeanor offenders. (Chief Renaud did not contest this account.)

It was a woeful miscalculation not only because the captains misread the threat, but also because word quickly spread by phone and text that looters were moving around Santa Monica at will, and waves of others followed in their wake.

A handful of motorcycle cops ended up driving down 4th Street to make arrests, and at least one officer, Sergeant Erika Aklufi, drove her patrol car into the thick of the mayhem. But, having failed to secure the streets from the get-go, as they did with relatively few officers at the Promenade and at the pier, the police were largely helpless in the face of superior numbers. Aklufi fled after her car windows were smashed.

When Santa Monica Place, the open-air mall next to the Promenade, came under attack mid-afternoon, the police took advantage of recently arrived reinforcements to send a column of several dozen officers to flush the looters out. But, in the words of one reporter on the scene, 4th Street, a block away, continued to be a “full riot.”

The theft and destruction began to expand out to other parts of the city, but the police were clustered downtown. Nobody monitored the flood of people with bags and backpacks who continued to drive in or ride the light rail from downtown Los Angeles,

and nobody did a thing to stop them. Dispatchers told one alarmed citizen after another that there was nothing they could do. Murray Greenberg, a local lawyer, complained that the police officer who answered his call hung up on him.

“That’s obviously an unacceptable response,” says Kristin McCowan, who was not a council member on May 31 but became one the following month after Morena gave up his seat for unrelated reasons. “To be told ‘you’re on your own’—I didn’t know you could even say that if you are a dispatcher.”

According to McCowan, the police made another fundamental miscalculation by assuming that the looting was a byproduct of anti-police sentiment in the protest crowd. “This was criminal looting, and it had nothing to do with the protest,” she says. “It was two completely separate things. There were areas of our city that had no one there, except people trying to do the job of the police for them.”

Morena ended up personally deterring looters by blocking store entrances with his bike. O’Day did much the same with his German shepherd. Elsewhere, the owners of a pharmacy across the street from Lana Negrete’s music shop stood guard outside with bulletproof vests and AR-15s. The owner of a bicycle store on Broadway leapt on to his roof, also with an assault rifle.

The city later made the case that on a uniquely challenging day the police had made the decision to protect human life first and foremost, and it was proud of the fact that nobody was killed or seriously injured. “Our public safety officers showed professional restraint and resolve under the most difficult of circumstances,” Mayor McKeown said in a statement in the early hours of June 1.

Where the worst of the damage occurred, however, the police weren’t in a position to show either restraint or its opposite. They were simply absent.



Santa Monica faced a similar threat before and handled it very differently. In the summer of 2000, during the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, the police heard that a group of anarchists was planning to tear the business district to pieces. On that occasion, though, the SMPD paid attention to what it was hearing.

John Miehle, then one of the force's primary tactical planners, remembers consulting with other cities and learning that would-be assailants tended to case stores in advance, hide bags of rocks and other makeshift weapons nearby, and jam police communications.

In response, the Santa Monica police switched radio frequencies. They kept lengths of chain-link fence on wheels around shopping areas so if something happened they could contain the area quickly and call on specially designated extraction teams to make arrests. They stocked up on pepperball launchers—much less aggressive than rubber bullets—and had city buses at the ready to block major intersections.

They also put out a warning that anyone with a backpack, or carrying a protest sign with a metal or wooden holder, would be turned away. All 230 city police officers were on duty, in tactical gear, with county sheriff's deputies primed to back them up if necessary.

And the precautions paid off. "Nothing happened," Miehle says. "We never fired a damn thing. Some idiot on the pier tried to burn a horse with a cigarette, and the horse hip-chucked him off the pier. That was the only incident."

The key difference in 2020, according Miehle, was that the top ranks of the police had little experience or knowledge of handling tactical situations, and the city's civilian leaders were so focused on fostering a collegial governmental culture—a common tendency in many smaller cities—that they failed to exercise the necessary oversight.

"In my 30 years on the force, I had 2,000 hours of training, a lot of it in crowd control and defensive tactics," Miehle says. "How much tactical training have Chief Renaud or her captains had? The chief seems like a very nice person, but you don't phone it in. I

don't give a shit who you are or what your family situation is, you get to your department.”

The city refused to provide training records for the top police brass, saying they were confidential. But Renaud acknowledged that they needed more training and would now start to receive it. One of the city officials who interviewed Renaud for the chief's job in 2018 said he could not recall whether she was asked about her experience in handling threats of civic unrest. But he said that the issue was not anywhere close to the top of the priority list during the interview. He assumed Renaud knew what she was doing, he said, because she'd written a master's thesis on public safety for the Center on Homeland Defense and Security in Monterey.



Former police chief Cynthia Renaud
SANTAMONICA.GOV

Renaud's likability appears to have served her well in the immediate aftermath of May 31 too. Although there was an immediate public clamor for her to resign, the instinct of many city's leaders was to circle the wagons and defend her to the hilt. In early June, acting city manager Lane Dilg was asked on a radio show how she would grade Renaud's performance and she said she would give the police a "strong A...for keeping our community safe."

In a bizarre news conference held in front of the pier the morning after the mayhem, Terry O'Day said that the message of peaceful protest "rang out loud and clear yesterday." Renaud herself proclaimed: "Today is a bright and beautiful day." To many

observers, the upbeat tone—scripted by city staffers, not by the speakers themselves—edged close to outright denial of the destruction lying all about.

Renaud’s internal communications at the time were similarly jarring. In a note sent to staff at 3:11 a.m. on June 1, she acknowledged they’d all had a rough day but added: “It was a team effort, to say the least, and the great thing is we are all now warmed up and ready to go.” She even praised the dispatchers who had told citizens over and over that they had no help to offer. “Dispatch was crankin’!” she wrote.

The city has since acknowledged that some of Renaud’s public statements—that the police had no credible indication of trouble and the events that transpired were “not expected or predicted”—were not correct. Dilg is said by those close to her to have felt burned by Chief Renaud after placing considerable trust in her, which led directly to the decision to press Renaud into retirement.

In an interview, Dilg says that even before Renaud’s departure the police had changed some of their intelligence-gathering methods to prevent important warnings from getting lost in the system. They had also started developing small mobile units to respond to tactical emergencies—something many police departments do as a matter of course.

“We need to learn and we need to do better,” Dilg says. “I grieve with the small business owners who lost everything. The day was difficult for people across our community in a number of different and deeply personal ways. I am committed to a true accounting of the facts.”

Miehle, the retired captain, doesn’t think this response went nearly far enough. “This isn’t the last time something like this is going to happen,” he says. “They need to take a good, hard look at what training needs there are, but not from inside the department. Maybe they get the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department to do a good evaluation. Then the city has to decide: Are the people we need to get trained capable of adhering to that training?”

Miehle thought bringing Seabrooks back was a “bad idea.” It would have been better, he says, to bring in an interim chief unafraid to crack heads and make the necessary changes without worrying about who gets offended in the process.

Seabrooks, in her interview, certainly showed no inclination to upset anyone in the ranks. She described police actions on May 31 as “a measured response that focused on community safety” and said she was proud that officers did not abuse their authority or break the law despite the pressures of the moment. She made the absence of lawlessness sound like an achievement as opposed to a baseline expectation of public officials.

“What I saw... was a police department that revered the human element,” she said. “You didn’t see a mob of officers in uniform. You did not see lawlessness on the part of the police. You did not see randomized violence as we have seen in other communities.”

Seabrooks acknowledged that some protesters were injured by tear gas canisters and rubber bullets, but she maintained: “Nobody was *substantially* injured at the hands of the Santa Monica police.” This, too, she characterized as an achievement.

It remains to be seen how the new city council will react to such sentiments. O’Day is one of the three incumbents who lost their council seats on November 3. Mayor McKeown is regarded as little more than a figurehead, and a relatively ineffective one at that. (Not only did McKeown not show up for press conferences held on May 31 and the morning of June 1; city staff chose not to tell him they were even happening.) For now, the most outspoken council member is probably McCowan, a Santa Monica native who has worked for many years in and around Los Angeles city politics. (She is currently executive director of the Getty House Foundation, which organizes civic outreach events at Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti’s official residence in Hancock Park.)

McCowan worried the SMPD was not getting on track nearly fast enough given the political tensions likely to persist until Joe Biden’s inauguration, if not beyond. “They just know what *not* to do. Unfortunately, that’s what they’re going to be working off of,” she said. “We spend \$98 million a year on our police force, and they’re not ready for prime time.”